Recollections and Letters of Bret Harte

By MAY PEMBERTON.

In Two Parts—Part II.

I have said elsewhere that later in my life Bret Harte was a valued personal friend of my own. This was when he became a constant visitor at our second home, a Broadway in Worcestershire, where he and my father were engaged together in dramatizing some of the well known American stories. My childish vision of him in the velvet coat, and with thick, curly, brown hair, has grown dim with passing years; but the picture of him at this later time—1896 and subsequent years—is clearly before me. Thick, silky, white hair, parted in the middle of the forehead; a white, slightly drooping mustache; a reddish complexion, suggesting permanent sunburn from the blaze of Californian sunshine; light blue eyes; I still hear the characteristic voice, with its low toned modulations. I remember the consistent "smartness" of Bret Harte's appearance; the well cut clothes; the tie, socks and handkerchief all matching in color; the rather pointed shoes (he had very small feet), and closely fitting "spats"; the immaculate evening dress. He spoke frankly of the luxury it was to him to dress thus "in purple and fine linen" after years of roughing it in the gold digger's red flannel shirt, loose slacks and stiff high boots. How we enjoyed the tales he told when—sitting over coffee and cigar at the dinner table, or under the old greengage tree on the lawn—he became reminiscent of early days and sketched for us brief and stirring word pictures of his adventures as Express Messenger, riding on the box of the "stage" with Yuba Bill, unpleasantly conscious of the packets of "greenbacks" concealed in his boots and of "the gang," all skilled revolver shots, ready for a "holdup" where the road was narrowest and most deserted. And the stories of his camping days! . . . How they brought to our minds those masterpieces: "The Luck of Roaring Camp," "The Outcasts of Poker Flat." "How Santa Claus Come to Simpson's Bar" and other favorites. It was delightful to listen to anecdotes whimsically told by the creator of "Col. Starbottle," "Jack Hamlin" and "The Heathen Chinee."

I have given some of Bret Harte's letters to my father. I will now quote from some he wrote to me, much later; all written in light vein.

I had promised to send him some white fantail pigeons from my pen, and he wrote to me:

The Red House, Camberley, Surrey.
Dec. 8, 1899.

DEAR MISS MAY:

The Dovecote is finished and ready for your pigeons, and if you will kindly send me those you spoke of "The Red House" will be delighted. Don't give yourself any trouble, for I shall be glad to remit to you any disbursements you may have to make to others to enable the birds to travel comfortably and as becomes their degree and condition as former tenants of Pye Corner.* If there are any first class pigeon tickets take 'em! I should not like them to mix with any "tumblers" or vulgar acrobatic fowls traveling or "on tour."

I am here trying to get rid of a nasty cold, which I set up in London after leaving Broadway. But the fog and gloom have followed me even to this sunny hillside.

I shall see that the pigeons are safely housed unless—horrible thought!—they should turn out to be carrier pigeons and calmly return to Pye Corner! In which case I shall send you all sorts of abusive messages stuck all over their wings.

With love to all at Pye Corner. Yours always sincerely. BRET HARTE.

*The name of our house at Broadway. His fears were, in a sense, realized, for the pigeons refused to stay in their new home.

74 Lancaster Gate,
London W.,
28th Dec., '99.

DEAR MISS MAY:

I have just heard from "The Red House," Camberley, that one of the male pigeons managed to squeeze himself through the wires while in temporary confinement and escaped—leaving his mate disconsolate. He is said to have lingered for some fifteen minutes over the place, in jeering or regretful contemplation of the others, and then apparently shaped his course to Worcestershire, and—finally—Pye Corner.

Will you keep a look out at your own Dovecote for the deserter? You may be able to bring comfort to his abandoned mate—and joy to the sorrowing household at The Red House, but I have my doubts. It had the look of a premeditated desertion. Yours always sincerely,

BRET HARTE.

P. S.—If he should be so unprincipled a bird as to make his appearance at Pye Corner with *another mate*—hoping you would not detect the difference—don't be deceived! The real victim is here!

B. H.

Bret Harte made a hobby of photography (his hand camera stands on a book shelf in the room where I now write) and was eager that I should share his taste. To encourage me he gave me a pocket kodak and we then began a friendly rivalry in "snap-shots." He wrote to me:

Arford House,
Headley, Hants, Sunday.

MY DEAR MISS MAY:

I am quite envious of your photographic success. The little kodak picture of your sister is wonderfully good and shames my feeble efforts in the garden at Broadway, except the one where I "snapshotted" the "snapshooter" herself and brought down you and the dog with one barrel! Alas, the Mary Anderson de Navarro group turned out a failure, and the sublime patience your father and mother are showing in the most atrocious photographic situations brings tears to my eyes. Your mother, however, has a certain reserved melodramatic look in her eyes, as if she were "biding her time." I shall dread coming again to Broadway! Thanks for the prompt expedition of the third act. You must be "steeped" in the drama by this time. With love to all at Pye Corner, yours always sincerely, BRET HARTE.

As my father and Bret Harte worked together at the plays I made the typewritten copies from the manuscript pages. Sometimes during one of his longer visits Bret Harte would be engaged in writing one of his inimitable stories, still fragrant of the Far West, though written in the heart of England; and then it was my privilege to copy his manuscript; small, neatly written sheets, bearing scarcely a correction, the handwriting so small that often I had to use a magnifying glass to enable me to decipher some name or unfamiliar expression, or, in desperation, to invade his study and ask for what he laughingly called "interpretations." When writing he always wore eyeglasses with powerfully magnifying lenses, and he was, I think, unconscious of the minuteness of his caligraphy. He never put pen to paper till he had composed the particular phrase exactly as he meant it to stand, had found the right word which would perfectly convey his meaning. This made progress slow, and I have known him to write all morning and the result be only one or two small but perfectly accurate pages. He was a hard worker; his output was enormous. His fertile brain was never at a loss for plot or incident round which to weave his delicate, whimsical imagination.

I copy one or two more letters, peering as I do so into the microscopic writing.

74 Lancaster Gate,
London W., March 17.

DEAR MISS MAY:

Many thanks for the handsome typewritten copy of the prompt-book of "Sue." Were you not alarmed at the "prompt" directions, especially those cabalistic fractions about the "½," "¾" lights, &c.? The "blue in bunches" and the "whites slowly out" are dreadfully creepy!

By the way, have you yet photographed by your magnesium light? I have bought one just like yours, but I haven't tried it yet. You might give me a hint if you have used yours.

I am sending you the libretto of . . . the one act opera I spoke of. It contains about 8,000 words, and I should like you to do it as quickly as you can, as the composer wants to take it to Germany with him. There is no recitative in the libretto . . . all the passages are metrical and are rhymed. . . . You will be painfully reminded of the rhymes of a Gaiety burlesque, or a Christmas pantomime, but don't let that dismay you. Try to remember when you are becoming quite nauseated that the words will all be *absorbed* in the music—even after the whole thing has been translated into German—and nobody will ever know what they were! But I admit it's pretty hard on you!

1. The dramatised version of his story: "The Judgment of Bolinas Plain"; produced in New York September 15, 1896, and at the Garrick Theatre, London, June 10, 1898.

As my friend, hurry it up as soon as possible, and don't let it be seen out of the family. But if you like, after you have finished and *survived* it, you might show it to your father, unless his weak condition forbids it. . . .

Yours always sincerely,

BRET HARTE.

The Red House,
Camberley,
15th Feb., 1900.

DEAR MISS MAY:

The fourth act (of "Snowbound at Eagles") arrived safely this morning, and I congratulate you in having found your way through the snow to the post office. We have been "snowbound" here, too, and as the roads are almost impossible for walking I have been exercising with a shovel and broom on the garden paths—and admiring myself for always having given pennies to crossing sweepers. I have found out that I have a back and rheumatism, in spite of my enthusiasm—and I think I'd rather skate. We do have brilliant sunshine at times—between the snowstorms—but to-day is a tempest and sleet. I shudder to think what London may be.

With my thanks for your arctic courage in sending the MS., and deepest sympathy to you and Madge in your seclusion at Pye Corner,

Your always sincerely, BRET HARTE.

A member of our family asked him to write something in her autograph book and possibly expected some humorous contribution from the writer of many parodies. But when he handed back the book she read the lines:

"Never a tear bedims the eye
That time and patience may not dry;
Never a lip is curved in pain
That can't be kissed into smiles again."

Noted humrist as he was, he was full of tender feeling.

. . . . .

I began these simple reminiscences with a far away memory of childhood, and as I fold the faded letters and replace them in their case another vision of early years flashes across their pages; children and dogs gathered round a Christmas fire, a tense silence, a tear surreptitiously winked away as they listen to a favorite story. . . . In later years we laughed at "Plain Language from Truthful James," but "The Christmas Gift That Came to Rupert" never failed to touch our hearts.

Etchings of the Orient

ON A CHINESE SCREEN. By W. Somerset Maugham. George H. Doran Company.

IN approaching this book the reviewer finds himself handicapped by the fact that the author has so completely and tersely summed it up in his title. Imagine, if you please, a composite, all embracing Chinese screen, filled with the full flavor of the Orient; imagine such a screen translated into delicate, serene, picturesque prose, with a sense of style that is doubly delightful because never self-assertive—and you have, as nearly as words can convey, some idea of the substance of this agreeable volume. Open anywhere at random and you will run across a little gem of description, gay or tragic, that will have something indelible in your memory. Here, for instance, under the title "The Beast of Burden," he describes the coolie: "You see old men without an ounce of fat on their bodies, their skin loose on their bones, wizened, their little faces wrinkled and apelike, with hair gray and thin; and they totter under their burdens to the edge of the grave in which at last they shall have rest."

In sharp contrast is "The Cabinet Minister," a "thin man, with thin, aristocratic hands, and the look of a student or a dreamer." He shows Mr. Maugham his priceless porcelains, bronzes and Tang figures, and discourses with rare knowledge upon native art. "But to me," adds the author, "the most charming part of it was that I knew all the time that he was a rascal. Corrupt, inefficient and unscrupulous, he let nothing stand in his way. . . . But when he held in his hand a little vase of the color of lapis lazuli, his melancholy eyes caressed it as they looked, and his lips were slightly parted as though with a sigh of desire."

For brevity, symmetry and graphic value the bit called "Arabesque" is perhaps the most notable achievement in the book. It is a summing up of the Great Wall in barely a hundred words, and deserves to be quoted in entirety:

There in the mist, enormous, majestic, silent and terrible, stood the Great Wall of China. Solitarily, with the indifference or Nature herself, it crept up the mountain side and slipped down to the depths of the valley. Menacingly, the grim watch towers, stark and foursquare, at due intervals stood at their posts. Ruthlessly, for it was built at the cost of a million lives, and each one of those great gray stones has been stained with the bloody tears of the captive and the outcast, it forged its dark way through a sea of rugged mountains. Fearlessly, it went on its endless journey, league upon league, to the furthermost regions of Asia, in utter solitude, mysterious like the great empire it guarded. There in the mist, enormous, majestic, silent and terrible, stood the Great Wall of China.

But now and again, by way of contrast, Mr. Maugham gives free rein to his sense of humor. A refreshing example is furnished by his conversation with "The Missionary Lady," which comes near to being the last word in platitudes. "I always think," she remarks pleasantly, "that if you know both sides of a question you will judge differently from what you will if you only know one side. . . . No one can eat their cake and have it, and one has to take the rough with the smooth. . . . No one is perfect in this world, and we can't do more than we can." Mr. Maugham's sporting blood is up by this time, and he meets her on her own ground: "Most men live long enough to discover that every cloud has a silver lining," he tells her earnestly.

FREDERIC TABER COOPER.